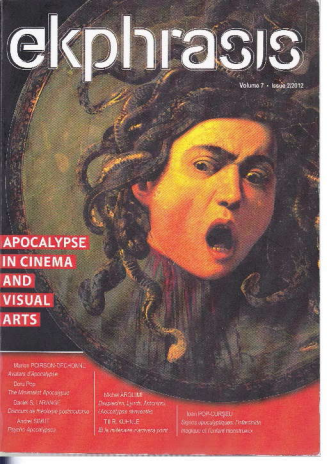

Robert DEAN

Ethical Catechism and "The Walking Dead"

Abstract: The setting, exploration, and adaptation of ethical scenarios are processes which lie at the heart of ethical debate. While they are used by philosophers as a means of illustrating key concepts, the conflicts around which they are positioned are charged with a powerful dramatic currency that has been frequently explored and exploited across all forms of narrative media. When these scenarios are set against a post-apocalyptic backdrop the usual considerations that inform moral maxims are inevitably and intentionally re-orientated. This paper will focus on the American TV drama series *The Walking Dead* (2010) which takes place after a zombie apocalypse and follows a small band of 'survivors' as they navigate their way across Atlanta in search of sanctuary. The ethical dilemmas that the group find themselves in inform the narrative of each (and oftentimes consecutive) episodes. Kant's *Categorical* and *Hypothetical* Imperatives, Fletcher's *Situation Ethics*, and Mills' *Utilitarianism* are dramatically rendered as the characters attempt to continually reconcile their ethical behaviour with their personal survival and the protection of the group. The program could be described as 'ethics for the masses'. From this perspective, the show provides an accessible framework through which the audience engages in both internal and orated informal ethical debate as they respond to the different arguments, attitudes, and actions presented. However, while it would seem that the encouragement of such reflection is a positive application of popular entertainment this paper will also consider the way in which the grammar and conventions of television are used to guide the viewer's ethical conclusions.

Keywords: zombie, apocalypse, television, Situation Ethics, Utilitarianism, Hulme, Robinsonade.

On Halloween evening 2010 the American cable channel AMC broadcasted the first episode of 'The Walking Dead.' The narrative (based on the comic book series after which it is named) takes place after a zombie apocalypse and follows a small band of 'survivors' as they navigate their way across Atlanta in search of sanctuary. In the very first scene, before the opening credits have rolled, the audience witnesses a sheriff surveying what initially appears to be the scene of a major road accident. Whilst picking his way through the cars he stumbles across a little girl only to discover that she is a zombie (or to use the show's terminology 'a walker'). As the zombie

Robert Dean

University of Glamorgan, Cardiff, UK
Email: rndean@glam.ac.uk

EKPHRASIS, 2/2012
APOCALYPSE IN CINEMA AND VISUAL ARTS.
NEW IMAGES FOR OLD MYTHS
pp. 87-95

child charges towards him the sheriff initially backs away before drawing his Colt Magnum revolver and shooting her between the eyes. The impact of the shot spatters blood across the road and sends the little girl and her teddy bear tumbling to the ground. At this point the theme tune begins and the opening credits role.

On one level the function of this opening scene is to provide a hook with which to snare audience's interest. Presenting this scene without providing any prologue or prior exposition will raise questions in the viewer's mind which they can only find answers to if they keep watching. Indeed, this is the central principle upon which the structure and success of most television series' depend. However, in this example there is another dimension which both contributes to and expands the scene's significance.

The audience is presented with two familiar iconic archetypes: a physical representation of justice and protection embodied by the county sheriff with his Stetson, badge, and magnum, followed by the appearance of a lost little girl complete with rabbit slippers and teddy bear, a presence that would usually symbolize purity and innocence. In most scenarios when such characters share screen time the Sherriff assumes the role of hero through his endeavors to rescue the little girl. But in 'The Walking Dead' the actions of the characters are subverted. The little girl is not under threat, she is the threat. In this post-apocalyptic landscape the symbol of innocence and purity is mutilated and mutated into a monster, while the would-be rescuer becomes her prey and ultimately her executioner.

The beginning of the series clearly signals that in this storyworld the 'compositional rules' which usually govern character behaviour and narrative development no longer apply. Since the evolution and popularization of melodrama, a genre with which this programme shares many conventions, these 'compositional rules' have been frequently repeated and consolidated. As Todorov identified in his paper 'Structural Analysis of Narrative' (1969, 75) such narratives can usually be broken down into three constituent and consecutive phases: equilibrium established, equilibrium disrupted, and equilibrium reinstated. Brooks went on to observe that plays from the melodramatic genre 'typically open with a presentation of virtue and innocence' (1976, 29). In contrast, 'The Walking Dead' dismantles any sense of equilibrium by transforming the customary symbol of virtue and innocence into a flesh eating zombie which the hero guns down in the opening scene.

The conventional manner in which character types and events are arranged also feeds into a central tenet and characteristic of melodrama that is formed

around a clear moral and ethical framework. Put in its simplest form, a course of action that is dutiful, faithful, and virtuous will be rewarded while cowardly, sacrilegious, and vicious behavior will be punished. Like the other conventions, the stability of this manichean formula is stretched to breaking point by the ethical challenges characters face when navigating the post-apocalyptic landscape. By the end of the first series the group of survivors have debated questions of whether to risk the lives of the many in order to save the lives of a few. They have been required to restrain, desert, or execute family members and others from within their small community. In addition, the episodes have tackled other more domestic and practical moral questions such as the point at which to intervene in marital affairs, the sharing of resources, and the rights and wrongs of looting. From an ethical perspective these storylines and the actions they present have the effect of re-calibrating the moral compass for a post-apocalyptic age. Like characters trapped in a dystopian world within this endgame environment, 'the protagonist's mental universe is turned upside down as he is compelled to redefine all the concepts through which he lives' (Rose 1981:167).

In order to illustrate the manner in which this is achieved and highlight the type of issues that are raised in the programme this paper will focus on 4 ethical dilemmas that occur in the first episode of the second series. These examples and the moral questions they raise occur within the space of forty minutes, a frequency which is consistently maintained throughout most of the series.

Eight minutes into the episode the motor home, a vehicle that is essentially the main wagon of the convoy, breaks down on a highway of stationary cars many of which contain the corpses of their owners. The driver (a character called Dale) initially assumes this is going to be a significant problem and prevent them from reaching the sanctuary they hope to find at Fort Benning. However, he soon realises his mistake and is reminded of the fact that there are spare parts all around him:

Shane: You can't find a radiator hose here?

Indeed as Daryl points out while he roots around in an open boot:

Daryl: There's a whole bunch of stuff we could find.

While the rest of the group move in to salvage what they can the hero's wife Lori raises an objection.

Lori: This is a graveyard. *(Cut to the others faces)* I don't know how I feel about this.

Lori's comments align the groups' keenness to collect resources with the moral implications of scavenging in a graveyard. However, after a momentary pause the objection is wholly disregarded and Shane instructs:

Shane: C'mon y'all just look around gather what you can.

In this fairly straightforward example the audience is presented with a dramatic enactment of what Hume refers to as 'extreme necessity' in his treatise on morals:

> Suppose a society [was] to fall into such want of all common necessaries, that the utmost frugality and industry cannot preserve the greatest number from perishing and the whole from extreme sufferance [...] is it a crime, after a shipwreck, to seize whatever means or instrument of safety one can lay hold of, without regard to former limitations of property [...] Where the society is ready to perish from extreme necessity, no greater evil can be dreaded from violence and injustice; and every man may now provide for himself by all the means, which prudence can dictate, or humanity permit. (Hume, 1775, 22-3)

In this short paragraph Hume sets out the ethical limits of justice in relation to property rights and illustrates his point with the analogy of shipwreck survivors; a hypothetical scenario which reflects the period in which he was writing. The possibility of being shipwrecked was a valid real world concern in a pre-aviation age of wooden boats and oceanic trade routes, particular for an island nation with colonial aspirations. However, the reference also makes a connection with popular fiction and the literary genre that would become known as 'Robinsonade'[1] following the 18th Century publication that popularised survival fiction – Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Similarly, in 'The Walking Dead' the audience are presented with a survival situation based around a popular subject of contemporary culture and it in this context that the potential tension between prudence and humanity is explored.

The manner in which Lori's objection is dealt also warrants consideration. Throughout the series most dilemmas with an ethical dimension are debated by the group before any action is taken. On this occasion though, the opportunity for such discussion is quickly and silently snubbed. Lori's concern is not given any recognition and after a few shots of various characters looking a little awkward, the group disperse to search for supplies. As such, their combined responses support the Humean principle of 'extreme necessity' and confirm that the moral concern Lori raises is no longer applicable in the context of the environment and situation presented.

As the group scavenge what they can, a nomadic herd of 'walkers' appear on the road. Most of the characters manage to hide under cars but in the confusion two mothers (Lori and Carol) are separated from their children (Carl and Sophia). While the walkers pass by inches away from the children's hiding plac-

es their parents can only watch in horrified silence as any noise would alert the herd and place the entire group in jeopardy. Suddenly, a walker from the back of the pack stumbles across Sophia's hiding place and starts to crawl under the car after her. Seeing her little girl in mortal danger proves too much for Carol to bear and she tries to cry out. Lori quickly responds by forcibly restraining Carol and muffling her cries thereby protecting the rest of the group.

On this occasion the programme presents a dramatic re-interpretation of one of the most well-known scenarios associated with ethical debate. In Fletcher's religious take on utilitarianism 'Situation Ethics: The New Morality' (1966) the author poises the following question:

In the 18th century along the Boone Trail, the following two scenarios took place:

a) Scottish woman saw that her suckling baby, ill, and crying, was betraying her and her other three children, and the whole company to the Indians. But she clung to her child, and they were caught and killed.
b) Negro woman, seeing how her crying baby endangered another trail party, killed it with her own hands, to keep silence and reach the fort.

Which woman made the right decision? (Fletcher, 1966, 125)

Although the situation Fletcher describes and the scene featured in 'The Walking Dead' are not identical, particularly as the latter doesn't not involve a mother committing infanticide, other aspects bear clear similarities. The wagon train is updated to a convoy of motor vehicles, the Indians are replaced by a nomadic herd of zombies, and in both cases their destination is a military fort. In the 21st century adaptation, Carol assumes the role of the Scottish women whose natural instinct and maternal love prompts her to disregard the safety of the group, while Lori acts in defence of the group by remaining silent and stifling the screams of her distressed counterpart. However, whereas the extract from Fletcher's text finishes with a question, the televisual rendering of this comparable situation also carries a semantic charge generated through the sum of its component parts.

From this perspective, it is equally significant that Carol is a minor character from a lower class who is generally portrayed as being subservient and overly emotional. In comparison, Lori is the hero's wife, has a middle class background, and for the most part displays courage and strength of character. Indeed, the previous episodes have clearly established Lori as the main female protagonist and most influential spokesperson for her gender. These factors inevitably alter how the audience read and interpret the scene. Carol's behaviour, which

could have been portrayed as an entirely understandable submission to 'natural law', is presented as a dangerous weakness which a stronger, rational, and more important character has to forcibly restrain. Therefore the deliberation Fletcher invites his readers to engage in is skewed in favour of a utilitarian act which puts the needs of the many over the needs of the few. (A somewhat ironic reverse of the possible bias Fletcher attempted to achieve with his use of race.)

As the scene continues Sophia escapes pursued by a Walker and although Rick attempts to rescue her he loses her in the surrounding woods. The resulting search for Sophia is a storyline that is maintained throughout subsequent episodes as the survivors split up into smaller groups in an attempt to find the missing child. In this episode, after the initial attempt to track Sophia proves unsuccessful, the following day the group begin a more extensive search while Dale and T-Dog remain on the road to guard base camp. Dale assumes his usual position on top of the motor home armed with his rifle and binoculars, thereby prompting T-Dog to question his priorities:

> **T-Dog:** Ain't you supposed to be fixing that radiator? What if the others come back with Sophia, and Rick wants to move on right away?

Dale reveals that he actually fixed the RV the day before, but has been pretending that the job is proving difficult. His justification for purposefully deceiving the rest of the group, or tricking them

with a 'pantomime' as he puts it, is specifically phrased as a direct opposition to utilitarian ethics:

> **Dale:** I'm just guarding against the worst. Sooner or later, if she's not found, people will start doing maths. I want to hold off the needs of the many versus the needs of the few arguments for as long as I can.

With this statement the character counters Mill's principles of utility and equality and positively asserts a moral position which values the life of an innocent child over the safety of the group and the immorality of deceit. Such is Dale's confidence in the intrinsic goodness of his moral rationale that he believes himself to be justified in depriving the group of their right to choose whether they should continue to their intended destination or carry on searching. Indeed, Dale's deception is by his own admission a tactic designed to avoid even discussing the issue in case a less compassionate decision is arrived at through democratic debate.

Once again the significance of the character's behaviour cannot be divorced from the manner in which the scene is presented. In this instance religious subtext drips from the mise-en-scene. An

old man with a white beard guarding over everyone from his elevated position (which in this shot appears to be literally in the sky) makes decisions on what is right and wrong without consulting those it affects. Furthermore, this is not the first time the character has 'played god'.

In the previous episode after learning that there is no rescue or, respite from their precarious existence, the group is presented with the choice between reassigning themselves to a continued struggle through the post-apocalyptic wilderness or taking the option of an instant painless death by remaining in a building set to self destruct. Most of the group choose life, but two characters (Jacqui and Andrea) decide to stay. Andrea's decision prompts Dale to emotionally blackmail her with his own death, telling her: "if you're staying I stay". Dale's tactic works and in true melodramatic fashion the two of them only just make it out of the building before it explodes.

In the episode that follows (after having had her own gruesome run in with a walker that strayed from the herd) Andrea confronts Dale and responds to his expectation of gratitude with the following diatribe:

> **Andrea:** Gratitude!I wanted to die my way! Not torn apart by drooling freaks. That was my choice. You took that away from me Dale.
> **Dale:** But...
> **Andrea:** But you know better. All I wanted after my sister died was to get out of this endless horrific nightmare we live everyday. I wasn't hurting anyone else. You took my choice away Dale. And you want gratitude!
> **Dale:** I don't know what to say.
> **Andrea:** There is nothing to say. I'm not your little girl. I'm not your wife. And I'm sure as hell not your problem. That's all there is to say."

The moral composition of this scene is essentially a dramatic depiction of opposing ethical perspectives. One the one hand there is the benevolent Fletcherian hero acting out of love for his fellow survivors and, on the other, there is the Humean heroine demanding her egalitarian right to choose. Although Hulme articulates his conclusion on the subject of suicide in a more scholarly manner and format the principle remains the same:

> That Suicide may often be consistent with interest and with our duty to *ourselves*, no one can question... misfortune may render life a burden, and make it worse even than annihilation. (Hume, 1783, 10)

The post-apocalyptic environment coupled with the ever present threat of being eaten alive certainly provides a potent hypothetical situation that takes the notion of misfortune to its extreme. Indeed, it is better encapsulated by Hume's earlier reference in the essay to being 'hunted by pain and misery' (Hume, 1783, 13).

The interpretation of 'The Walking Dead' put forward in this paper presents the programme as a platform on which fundamental ethical questions are dramatised for mass consumption. From this perspective, the show provides an acces-

sible framework through which the audience engages in both internal and orated informal ethical debate as they respond to the different arguments, attitudes, and actions presented. It is also apparent that the medium itself resists impartiality as the grammar and conventions of television drama combine additional aesthetic factors and narratological developments which inevitably guide the viewer's ethical conclusions. However, the overarching backdrop of a zombie apocalypse against which the events are acted out also provides an opportunity for the type of dramatic iconoclasm seen in the opening scene of the series, in which firmly established character types and anticipated behaviour patterns are inverted.

The series seems to relish in setting up scenarios that initially conform to audience expectations before dramatically reversing them. Indeed, the scene where Dale benevolently sets out his non-utilitarian position is intercut with a scene in which Sophia's would be rescuers hear the sound of church bells ringing. As the characters' search for the source they speculate that whoever's is ringing the bells may be with Sophia and trying to summon the group, or that it may even be Sophia ringing them herself. The overriding implication of such a narrative development is as unavoidable as Dale's sermon from the roof: a little girl lost in the wilderness finds sanctuary and her means of deliverance in a 'house of God'. However, the group arrive to find the church populated by walkers with a zombie priest stood at the altar. After executing the congregation (and spilling a good deal of blood on consecrated ground in the process) the bells begin to ring again, seemingly in response to Daryl's informal prayer: '"Yo J.C., are you taking requests?" The group rush outside only to discover that the sound which summoned them is actually a looped recording on a timer.

This ironic and nihilistic punch-line dashes the audiences' and characters' hopes for a mother and child reunion, whilst simultaneously exposing the inadequacy of conventional audience expectations learnt through melodramatic narratives with their roots in judeo-christian ideology. Against the apocalyptic backdrop religion and its trappings has lost its metaphysical value. The bell ringer summoning the faithful to prayer is reduced to a mechanical recording, the church is merely another building that needs to be cleared of walkers, and the priest is nothing but a zombie in ecclesiastic clothing. Thus, while God may not be dead, he is certainly absent. This idea is reinforced in much the same way at the end of the episode when Rick's prayer for 'a sign' appears to be granted in the form of a wild deer that appears in a parting between the trees. As Rick and Shane watch in wonderment Carl (Rick's son) slowly moves towards the animal to touch it. However, the miracle quickly reverts to the diabolical when an unseen hunter shoots the deer and the bullet hits Carl.

In the 2004 the *Sears List of Subject Headings* (a publication used for library classification) listed apocalyptic fantasies within the Robinsonade fiction category. However, compared to

Robinsonade fiction in which the disasters and survival situations they provoke are relatively localised, when the catalytic event is apocalyptic the consolation of moral principles with survival and necessity is stretched to its farthest point. Furthermore, unlike the few cannibals Crusoe and Friday tried their best to avoid, the survivors featured in 'The Walking Dead' have a continent of flesh eating zombies to contend with. In essence the apocalyptic context takes the "what if" basis of hypothetical ethical questions and places them *'in extremis.'* Normal distinctions between right and wrong are blurred and in this grave new world heroes act like villains, the *deus-ex-machina* fails to launch, and the social contract is open for amendments.

References

BROOKS, P. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*. Yale University Press, 1976.

FLETCHER, J. *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1966.

HUME, D. (1775) *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles Of Morals*. Hackett Publishing, 1983.

HUME, D. (1783) *On Suicide*. Penguin Books, 2005.

MILLER, J. (ed.) *Sears List of Subject Headings*. The H. W. Wilson Co., 2004.

ROSE, M. *Alien Encounters: Anatomy of Science Fiction.* Harvard University Press, 1981.

TODOROV, T. & WEINSTEIN, A. Structural Analysis of Narrative. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 1969, 3 (1), pp. 70-6.